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THE MOBILE HOME FROM A PLANNING STANDPOINT

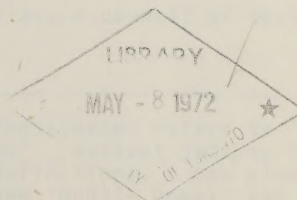
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SEMINAR ON MOBILE HOME PARKS

St. Clair Region Development Council
Chatham, Ontario.

November 9, 1971



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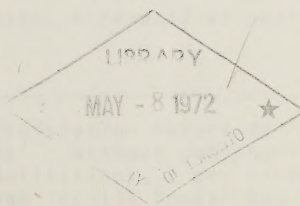
THE MOBILE HOME FROM A PLANNING STANDPOINT

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THE MOBILE HOME FROM A PLANNING STANDPOINT

Your program indicates that my topic is "The Mobile Home Park from a Planning standpoint". If I may, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to broaden this somewhat, to deal with "The Mobile Home from a Planning Standpoint".

Planners across the country, as well as in Ontario, are taking a new look at mobile homes*. We know this because in the process of exploring the many aspects of mobile home use, we have assembled a reasonably comprehensive library on the subject. We now have well over 100 reports, including about 25 reports published by various agencies in Canada. And most of these Canadian publications have appeared quite recently -- within the past two years. There are also several periodicals, numerous magazine articles and hundreds of newspaper stories regarding mobile home use.

A striking change has occurred in the scope of the published information. Whereas a few years ago, most of the information was published by the trade, reports are now available which reflect many different points of view. e.g. In Canada reports have been prepared by the Federal government, provincial governments, municipalities, a council of social agencies -- and even stockbrokers.

* Much of the existing legislation refers to 'trailers' rather than 'mobile homes'. Without getting tied up in the intricacies of precise definitions, I can simply say that we draw a distinction between 'mobile homes' and 'travel trailers' largely on the basis of permanent versus seasonal occupancy. Differences in size and degree of mobility also enter into the picture but there is no firm dividing line. Similarly, while travel trailers have independent water supply and waste disposal facilities, some also have 3-point hook-ups for water, sewer and power, so again the distinction is fuzzy.



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Before looking at the planning implications of mobile home use, I probably should comment on the respective roles of the municipality and the Province regarding mobile homes.

The municipality is responsible for deciding whether mobile homes are an appropriate form of residential accommodation in their particular community. This municipal decision is likely to be based largely on three factors: (1) the existing housing supply in relation to housing demand, (2) the probable effect on municipal finances of allowing mobile homes, and (3) public demand for mobile homes. Alternatively, the municipality may simply decide that their housing supply should offer choices, so people will have the opportunity to select the type of housing they prefer -- a single family house, duplex, apartment, town house or mobile home.

The municipality often turns to the Community Planning Branch for assistance in making its decision or for planning advice on how to handle mobile homes. These planning matters include such things as choice of location for mobile homes (e.g. on individual lots or grouped in mobile home parks); size of the mobile home park or parks; standards for use in designing the site plan for a mobile home park; provision of utilities and services to the park; the level of licensing or taxation; and so on.

Obviously, the Community Planning Branch must be in a position to offer sound advice, based on up-to-date information. It is for this reason that the Branch has undertaken a research project

on mobile homes. This work is now proceeding and, to a large extent, we are still forming the questions. It will be some time before we have reports for distribution. The purpose of our research is to try to determine whether there are community problems associated with the increasing use of this particular type of structure as a permanent residence. There are many apparent contradictions and anomalies and you will be familiar with some of them, but probably not all. Rather than deal with any one exhaustively, I propose to mention briefly some of the facts which appear to involve inconsistencies and to raise a few relevant questions. Hopefully, this will leave sufficient time for your questions later.

1. Mobile homes are being sold in considerable numbers in Ontario, so one must assume that many families find them an acceptable home. YET MANY MUNICIPALITIES REFUSE TO ACCEPT MOBILE HOMES.

Is this refusal based on more than post-World War II experience?

2. Mobile home park proposals are not always acceptable to residents of nearby properties. EVEN WHEN THEY ARE ACCEPTED IN PRINCIPLE, SPECIFIC PROPOSALS MAY BE TURNED DOWN BECAUSE EACH PERSON SAYS, "MOBILE HOMES ARE FINE. BUT I WOULDN'T WANT TO LIVE BESIDE ONE."

The objections vary, but include such things as: mobile homes don't look like houses; they will increase traffic; they will depreciate property values; and so on. Are these

objections valid? Are there basic differences between the people who want to live in a mobile home and the people who don't want to live near a mobile home?

The London experience provides an example of this. There, a proposed mobile home park was acceptable to the planning staff and Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation indicated that they were prepared to finance it. But the citizens living near the proposed site protested at a Planning Board public hearing and later at an Ontario Municipal Board hearing. The proposal was turned down by the Planning Board, by the City Council and by the Ontario Municipal Board.

3. Mobile home parks in Ontario vary in size -- ranging from 8 - 10 spaces to over 250. The size is often determined by economic considerations, such as the number of units which can be served economically by a sewer system, or the number of mobile home spaces that can be managed efficiently by one full-time manager.
EQUALLY IMPORTANT ARE THE SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS.

What scale of mobile home park is preferable for residents? At what scale does the mobile home park become a more readily identifiable community, which may be assigned a special (and probably lower) status by the rest of the community? Given a demand for several hundred mobile homes, is it preferable to locate them in one large mobile home park, or in several small ones?

We do know that there are significant differences in size in different parts of the province. Our interviews with

mobile home park managers last August indicated that in your St. Clair Region the mobile home parks tend to be quite large, averaging 85 - 90 spaces; while in the Sudbury area they tend to be relatively small, averaging about 25 - 30 spaces. We don't know at this point why this pattern prevails.

4. Mobile homes are usually segregated from the rest of the community and located in a community of their own (a mobile home park) where the owners rent land. MOBILE HOME OWNERS ARE, THEREFORE, SUBJECT TO EVICTION, AS ARE OTHER TENANTS. THEY DO NOT HAVE THE PROTECTION OF A LEASE, AS APARTMENT TENANTS DO, AND ARE NOT COVERED BY EXISTING LEGISLATION.

Questions arise concerning the problems of eviction from a mobile home park. Where does one go with a large mobile home and no place to put it? What rights does, or should a tenant have? Conversely, what rights should the park owner have? Is it reasonable to charge "pad fees", or entrance fees, to mobile home owners who do not purchase their home from the park owner?

5. Mobile home parks have often been located in commercial or industrial districts. CONVENTIONAL HOUSING IS LOCATED IN RESIDENTIAL ZONING DISTRICTS.

As the people living in mobile homes have the same needs for community facilities as other citizens, questions arise as to why mobile home parks are not also in residential districts. Locational determinants certainly include good access, which can be obtained along highway frontage, but also include reasonable proximity to shops, schools and recreation facilities.

6. For conventional housing, the municipality is responsible for roads, utilities, street lighting and such services as snow removal and garbage collection. THE DEVELOPER OF A MOBILE HOME PARK PROVIDES INTERNAL ROADS, CONNECTIONS TO THE WATER SUPPLY AND SEWAGE DISPOSAL SYSTEM AND STREET LIGHTING. HE ALSO HANDLES SNOW REMOVAL AND GARBAGE COLLECTION.

What responsibilities does, or should, a municipality have with respect to a mobile home park? How can the municipality be assured that the standards for mobile home park roads and utilities are adequate? How can the municipality ensure that private roads, utilities and grounds in the mobile home park will be maintained to an acceptable standard? Municipalities are seeking answers to these thorny questions.

7. Provincial legislation provides that municipalities may license mobile homes. NORMALLY, MOBILE HOMES ARE NOT ASSESSED AND TAXED IN THE SAME WAY AS OTHER RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY.

This situation gives rise to protests from the municipalities that mobile homes do not pay their way; and from some mobile home owners that they pay too much. Both claims are probably correct in specific cases. One of the basic questions which needs to be resolved is "Should mobile homes be taxed in the same way as other homes?"

8. The Planning Act provides that subdivisions for conventional housing require the approval of the

Minister of Municipal Affairs. MOBILE HOME PARKS ARE USUALLY DEVELOPED ON A SINGLE PARCEL OF LAND, SO THEY ARE NOT "SUBDIVISIONS" AND THEREFORE DO NOT REQUIRE THE APPROVAL OF THE MINISTER.

Most of the same design principles apply to site planning for mobile home parks as to subdivision design for conventional housing. So questions arise as to why a mobile home site plan should not follow the same review process as a subdivision. Another question: would it be desirable to develop a mobile home park as a condominium, where the land and central facilities are owned jointly?

9. Building by-laws apply to conventional housing. MOBILE HOMES ARE NOT GOVERNED BY THE BUILDING BY-LAWS WHICH APPLY TO BUILDINGS CONSTRUCTED ON THE SITE.

This may be one of the reasons why some municipalities are reluctant to permit mobile homes -- because they are an unknown. (Even the manufacturers sometimes have difficulty deciding what a mobile home is. At least this is one conclusion that may be drawn from the fact that, at the official opening of a new mobile home plant in Cobourg last year, they tried to launch a mobile home like a ship -- by breaking a bottle of champagne over it.)

The industry has failed to provide sufficient factual information concerning their products -- yet municipal officials have to be concerned if they are to discharge their responsibilities to the community. e.g. What are the answers to such questions as: How long will a mobile home last? (Some say 15 years; some say 30.) How quickly is a mobile home likely to become obsolete? (Some say 3 years; some 10. Many say they don't know.)

We are undertaking some research in this area at the present time, to obtain facts on structural quality and maintenance requirements -- in other words, an objective, analytical description of a mobile home as a housing type.

10. Mobile homes are often referred to as "low-cost" housing. Is this an accurate description? COST COMPARISONS WITH CONVENTIONAL HOUSING SHOULD RECOGNIZE THE DIFFERENCE IN SIZE OF THE DWELLING UNIT AND ALSO THE "ADD-ON" COSTS OF A MOBILE HOME. e.g. A CONVENTIONAL HOUSE COMES WITH LAND, STEPS, CONNECTIONS TO UTILITIES, A FOUNDATION, AND SO ON. THESE ARE NOT "EXTRAS", AS THEY ARE FOR MOBILE HOMES.

A senior official of the National Research Council has been quoted as saying that the secret of the mobile home's popularity is that it offers "less for less". There is nothing wrong with offering less for less if mobile homes serve a segment of the housing market not served by conventional housing, i.e. those who prefer less space or families who cannot afford "more for more". It should be noted, however, that a Vancouver report for the Lower Mainland Region, which compares the cost of a mobile home with a town house and a single-family house, concludes that mobile homes may be paid for sooner but are not as good an investment.

11. Most mobile homes now being marketed in Ontario still bear a recognizable family resemblance to their ancestors - the travel trailers. There are some variations, such as expandables and double-wides, but the typical mobile home here is still the single width (often 60' x 12').

Present concepts of siting mobile homes in Ontario involve one-storey development, with one mobile home per lot, rather than such variations as vertical stacking of units. When this approach is likely to reach the limit of its potential, it's hard to say. Certainly, we have at present few good examples of mobile home park design. However, considerable interest is being shown in improving the standards and both Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation and the Canadian Standards Association (through a sub-committee of manufacturers and mobile home park owners) have produced preliminary drafts of proposed standards. Also, developers are indicating their interest in constructing better parks.

At this stage in the development of the mobile home industry, some of the most interesting questions relate to the design of the dwelling unit. What design improvements are possible? Will mobile homes evolve into modular dwelling units which can be put together in a variety of imaginative ways? Will new design concepts make our present concepts and present mobile home park facilities obsolete in the near future?

Hopefully, manufacturers, park developers, planners, architects and others with an interest in better housing will seek to improve the way modules are designed, grouped and sited, in order to provide housing which comes closer to satisfying man's need for privacy and outdoor space as well as his need for social interaction.





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